

Jesus, prayer and power

21 May 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

When we're here at church we often sing songs and read the Bible and talk and share news. But there's something else important that we do. Do you know what it is? It's often something fairly quiet when most of us close our eyes ... it's **prayer!**

What do you think **prayer** is about? ... **talking** to God and **listening** to God.

In the stories we have about Jesus, we get the idea that Jesus prayed a lot.

He often got up very early in the morning and went off by himself to pray. Sometimes he would stay up the whole night praying.

And just before Jesus was killed, he also prayed. He talked to God about how he was feeling worried and alone and a bit scared. So when we feel worried, alone or scared - they're good times to pray.

Jesus also prayed for his friends that God would continue to protect them and look after them. And then, Jesus also prayed for people like us ... who have come to know God through Jesus. He prayed that we would work together for good and would know that God loves us.

Are there some things that you'd like to pray about this morning?

BIBLE READINGS

John 17:1-23

After Jesus spoke these words, he looked towards heaven and prayed:

Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ...

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. ... I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They know with certainty that I came from you, and they believe that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ... Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me.

... My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Acts 1:1-14

After his suffering, Jesus presented himself to the apostles and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On

one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

Then the disciples gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'

He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ...

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. They went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

MESSAGE Jesus, prayer and power

The passage we just heard from John's Gospel completes our journey through this marvelous Gospel.

The passage is sometimes known as Jesus' **High Priestly prayer** - as he prays for himself, for the disciples and for people like us.



I want to begin this morning by noting that prayer is a difficult topic for many of us...



- It can be a source of **guilt** – that we should pray more often – or pray better
- Or a source of **anxiety** – that our fumbling efforts create a barrier or a wall between ourselves and God rather than being a way to grow our relationship

- Prayer is sometimes seen as a low priority – because it seems to fulfil no **practical** purpose
- But prayer can also be a great **blessing** – for people who do grasp its value

For these and other reasons, prayer can sometimes be hard work.

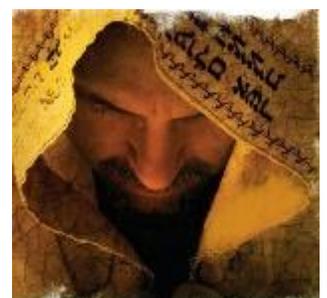
It can also be misunderstood ... we think we need to use **lots of words** and to remind God of everything that needs fixing in the world ... or at least everything that needs fixing in the lives of those we love.

But perhaps prayer is about more than a shopping list of needs.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is **often** praying.

He goes off by himself to pray, usually early in the morning, although we're not told about the **content** of these prayers.

Having observed the prayer pattern of Jesus, the disciples ask him to teach them **how** to pray and his brief response is the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer, which starts with a focus on God and then moves to our needs.





In the gospel of John, we get further insight into Jesus' relationship with God the Father that is enabled through prayer. Jesus claims that the words he speaks are the words of God and that his compassionate actions mirror the actions of God.

How does Jesus tap into the words and actions of God?



Through a deep and abiding relationship that is grounded in prayer.

It's how Jesus can say that he is **in** the Father and the Father is **in** him. He knows the Father's heart and character intimately and so can speak and act in a way that is fully in tune with God.

In the prayer in John chapter 17, Jesus touches on several topics that have been major themes right through this Gospel ...

- Jesus prays that his impending suffering and death will bring *glory* to both himself and to God. The cross is not a place of shame but rather a place of glory that points people to the love of God. The theme of Jesus' glory has been present since the opening chapter of the Gospel.
 - Jesus came to bring God's *life* to the world – **eternal life** – which he describes here as knowing the one true God and knowing Jesus the Son whom God sent into the world. Several of Jesus' remarkable 'I am' sayings have pointed to this life that is available through him.
 - Jesus prays for the disciples who at last believe the *truth* that Jesus did indeed come from God and is returning to God. The origins and identity of Jesus have been emphasised again and again – that he is the way, the truth and the life – the way to know and relate to God.
 - Jesus recognises that the disciples will face opposition and persecution just as he has. So he prays for their *protection* from the evil one – a prayer that is also featured in the Lord's Prayer. The main defence from evil is to know the truth that comes from knowing God.
 - Jesus prays for *unity* among the disciples, in the midst of betrayal by Judas and fear among the others for what might happen next. This unity is based on the intimate connection between Jesus and God, which in the future will include people like us. As we stay connected with Jesus – and through Jesus to God – we will find ourselves embraced by God's love and filled with Jesus' joy.
 - The disciples and ourselves are to continue Jesus' *mission* in the world ... we have been sent into the world just as Jesus was sent ... to bring a message of **life** and **light** and **love** to the world that is often seen as the opposite – a place of **death** and **darkness** that is **hostile** to God's ways.
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I mentioned earlier that prayer is sometimes criticized for not being **practical**. Yet it seems to me that our spiritual life is like **breathing** – we breathe **in** and we breathe **out**.

Both of these steps are essential for life.

Prayer is like the **inward** part of breathing. It's how we are refreshed inwardly and how we stay connected with God. When prayer seems like hard work, perhaps we're forgetting that prayer is as much **listening** to God and being **encouraged** by God as much as it is about naming our

struggles. It's why the Lord's Prayer and this prayer on John both begin by focusing on God and bringing honour and glory to God's name. Such an approach stops us from focusing all our attention on ourselves and our problems and gives us another perspective in which to see our situation.

But hopefully prayer then invites and inspires us to **action**. That's the **breathing out** part. Jesus has sent us out to be his people in the world

- offering compassion to those who are hurting
- feeding those who are hungry – just as we do through **Helping Hand**
- healing and restoring those who are sick
- seeking justice for those who have no voice

Through these and many other actions, we help to bring God's life and light and love to those around us. So rather than withdraw to be a holy huddle, we are join in the mess of the world and - however imperfectly – be the face and hands and feet of Jesus.

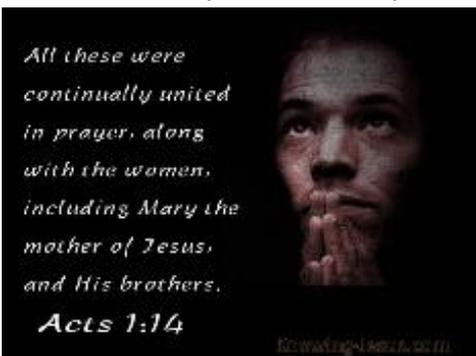
To be healthy and indeed to live, we need to be breathing in and breathing out. If all our focus falls on nurturing our spiritual life through prayer, we run the risk of becoming no earthly good. On the other hand, if all our focus falls on our witness and mission in the world, we will find ourselves being very busy and cut off from what nourishes and sustains our life. We risk becoming disconnected from Jesus the vine and slowly withering.

Briefly, our second reading today from **Acts** speaks of the ascension of Jesus and his instruction to the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the **gift of the Holy Spirit** who will give them power and ability to speak and act as witnesses to and for Jesus.

What happens 10 days later is of course the story of **Pentecost** that we will be celebrating next week. You might like to wear something bright – in red, yellow or orange or even blue or burgundy.



But as the disciples wait in expectation, two things stand out that reflect Jesus' prayer from John 17.



First they are **all together** - men and women, young and old – gathering in one place. They are living out the sort of **unity** that Jesus spoke about.

And what are they doing? They are devoting themselves to **prayer**. They are praying together as one ... which is another misunderstanding of prayer.

We often think that prayer is an **individual** activity that we each do alone in the privacy of our own home. Prayer is often

like that. But prayer is also a **community** activity. It's as we come together and pray that we will

experience the deep connection to God and to Jesus.

Let me close with a short prayer ...

Loving God,

we know that life can be beautiful and life can be difficult.

We do not ask that you take us out of the world,
but that you support and protect us.

Remind us each day of the truth we have heard here,
that your love is for everyone, and that Jesus' message is for everyone.

Send us out from here to bear witness in word and deed
to your grace, goodness and love.

May we hear your voice calling us at home and at work and during worship, in our social
settings and during our quiet times of prayer,
that we might know you and share your love and joy.

We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.